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Editorial

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Challenging dominant discourses of the past: 1968 and the value of oral history

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As 1968 is about to celebrate its 45th anniversary, we may wonder whether the '1968 years' will again prove to be 'a currency in public debates across the world', as Sarah Waters (2010) observed in her introduction to *Memories of 1968*, a collection of essays published in the wake of the 40th anniversary (p. 1).[1] In 2008, memorialisation of 1968 – often defined as the 'first global rebellion' – reached a climax, although Waters justly identifies tensions between attempts at turning the 1968 experience into an object of history, on one hand, and a continued precedence that is given to the *lived* experience (either positive or negative) of 1968, on the other (pp. 3–4). Nevertheless, processes of remembering seem to prevail over an historical approach to 1968: in particular, its transnational and generational character contributed to the difficult historicisation of a movement which lived in and for the present, and which rejected – in the name of participation and direct democracy – the dominant narratives of traditional historiography. Consequently, controversies have imbued the memory of 1968, most notably during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential election campaign in 2007, when Sarkozy stated that he wanted to 'liquidate' the heritage of 1968. His was one of two master narratives of 1968, described by Robert Gildea as 'a celebratory one of liberation both individual and social, and a demonizing one of a descent into chaos, whether of private hedonism or political violence or complicity with totalitarianism'.[2]

Arthur Marwick (1998), in his voluminous essay on *The Sixties*, describes a similar dichotomy in the interpretations that have been given of 1968, drawing it along ideological lines: 'In the eyes of the far left, it is the era when revolution was at hand, only to be betrayed by the feebleness of the faithful and the trickery of the enemy; to the radical right, an era of subversion and moral turpitude' (p. 3). Such a marked division is out of date, however, as the 'anti-1968' discourse Marwick attributed to the right-hand side of the political spectre has made way, in more recent years, to an appropriation and even a certain nostalgia with regard to the 1968 experience, both in France and in Italy, the two countries where 1968 has had most impact. In France, for example, the far right magazine *Le Choc du Mois* dedicated its May 2008 issue to the 1968 experience as seen from the right (Gordon, 2010: 57). Similarly, in January 2008, a special issue of the Italian monthly magazine *Charta minuta*, sponsored by the former neo-fascist party *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance,

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AN), set out to deconstruct the image of 1968 as an exclusively 'left-wing' phenomenon. The editors emphasised that 1968 represented, in reality, not an ideological but an existential and generational conflict, thus 'liberating' it of its ideological 'burden' and making its memory 'claimable' for other memory agents (Hajek, 2011).

Debates about the legacy of 1968 have therefore become more complex, and its memory is no longer 'owned' by a single memory group. They reflect what Michael Rothberg (2009) has termed 'multidirectional memory', that is, a memory which is 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing' (p. 3). This special issue – which includes case studies from France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy – sets out to explore different trajectories and narratives of 1968, and hence to create a more inclusive and complex history of 1968, which moves beyond established memories of 1968. In other words, it challenges those dominant narratives that have held 'a monopoly over its memory' (Waters, 2010: 10).

It does so through the application of oral history methodology, and therefore also reflects upon the value of oral history. Oral history sources have, for a long time, been criticised for their alleged unreliability, and subsequently marginalised as historians gave preference to written and documentary sources (Thomson, 2006: 53). As Lynn Abrams (2010) puts it, 'the historical profession kept oral history at arm's length for some time, not quite trusting it as a legitimate historical source' (p. 5). It was only after the Second World War that oral history research started to be considered as a valuable research method (Thomson, 2006: 51). In the 1970s, (oral) historians like Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini and Michael Frisch challenged the idea of oral history being unreliable and 'naïve', arguing that the subjective and narrative qualities of oral history sources were actually their strength, and that oral history provides useful clues 'about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory' (Thomson, 2006: 54).[3]

Oral history furthermore allows for a multitude of points of view, as Abrams (2010) claims when she writes, in her *Oral History Theory*, that oral history is 'one of the few ways by which those who have traditionally been silenced in History may be heard' (pp. 24–25). This becomes particularly evident in Anna von der Goltz' contribution to this special issue, where she confronts multiple trajectories of East German political activists after the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia, in August 1968. She juxtaposes the more common, 'celebrative' narrative of 'resistance against dictatorship' to a narrative which fits less easily into this dominant discourse, where the defeat of socialist reform in 1968 served 'as an impetus to forfeit open opposition in favour of pursuing change from within state structures'. Oral history, by allowing interviewees to seek and create 'composure',[4] is then of great value as it provides a counterpart to dominant historical narratives that, in Von der Goltz' article, 'reduce the GDR to an ill-fated experiment in dictatorship and that fail to take seriously the genuine idealism […] that led many to support the Socialist project – even after 1968' (p. 66).

The concept of composure and *dis*composure is also central to Celia Hughes' exploration of British far left activists who became active in the left network around the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, in the late 1960s, although hers is a more psychological approach where she also engages in the issues of inter-subjectivity and gender. Thus, in her discussion of two interviews with former activists of both sexes, Hughes offers an insight into the intricate mechanisms of the oral history interview, as she demonstrates how her own age, sex and subjectivity influenced the interview process as well as the level of composure or discomposure her interviewees achieved throughout the interview.

Robert Gildea, by contrast, draws on theories of individual and collective memories in his analysis of former French activists, their pathway to and interpretation of political activism in the

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present. Drawing on his research for the collaborative, pan-European project 'Around 1968: Activism, Networks, Trajectories', Gildea discusses five interviews with men and women of different cultural backgrounds, and their attempts at negotiating between private memories, memories of the groups to which they belonged, and cultural master narratives of 1968. Three of the five people Gildea interviewed for his research were, furthermore, marginal to the main narrative, even if representative of other important dimensions of 1968, such as gay activism and political violence.

The focus on marginal areas of activism is at the heart of a final article that draws directly on oral history interviews. In her discussion of an alternative 'hippy' community in a provincial and – in those years – deeply Catholic area of Central Italy, Sofia Serenelli takes us towards the geographical margins and the 'private side' of 1968. In her exploration of the activists' discovery of a new generational identity, Serenelli demonstrates the complexity of 1968 as she touches upon a number of key concepts in both oral history theory and memory studies, including possessive memory and collective silences.

The concept of generational identity is one which runs through all of the articles, and is indeed crucial in the study of 1968 and its difficult historicisation. It is explored more profoundly in one of two 'opening' articles, which are not based on oral history interviews but guide readers who are new to research in oral history and 1968 protests through some of the most important essays on 1968 and oral history, most notably Luisa Passerini's (1988) *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968*. The latter is compared, in Joseph Maslen's article, with Carolyn Steedman's experimental and 'auto/biographical' life-history, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. Maslen discusses these highly original texts on the basis of the dynamics between personal and social narratives that shape both narratives, written by two women belonging to the 1968 generation, but who relate to 1968 in very different ways.

The special issue opens with a review and a discussion of oral history literature in Italy, a country which has 'given' a great deal to oral history theory research, in terms both of granting oral history methodology more scientific credibility (we have seen how Passerini and Portelli argued for the value of oral history sources in historical research), and in terms of contributions to oral history literature. Thus, Bruno Bonomo discusses the body of historical works – both the 'classics' and more recent material – on the Italian 1968, some of which also recur in other articles in the issue, including Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation* and Ronald Fraser's (1988) collective volume *1968. A Student Generation in Revolt*. Drawing on the idea of a collective 'capture of speech', Bonomo explores the relation between 1968 and oral history, and the development of oral history research into the 1968 phenomenon over the past 45 years.

In brief, the essays gathered in this special issue – all drafted, with the exception of Anna von der Goltz' article, from presentations held at an interdisciplinary seminar at the University of Warwick in 2011 – offer an assessment of the value and limitations of oral history in the study of 1968 and, by extension, European protest movements in general. Furthermore, the essays demonstrate how life-writing techniques can both model and subvert existing discourses of the past, reveal the relations between individual and collective memories, and assess the impact of personal and political experiences on subjectivities. Finally, by hosting this special issue, the *Memory Studies* journal consolidates its interest in oral history, among a wide range of theoretical, empirical and methodological issues central to the understanding of memory, and implicitly invites oral historians from all disciplines to submit their research to the journal.

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Notes

1. The expression '1968 years' was introduced by French scholars. See Bruno Bonomo's article in this issue.
2. Sarkozy's vision obviously corresponds to the second narrative. See Robert Gildea in this issue.
3. See Portelli's article 'The peculiarities of oral history', published in 1981 in the *History Workshop Journal* and reprinted under the title 'What makes oral history different', in *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: Form and meaning in oral history* (1991); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in popular memory: The cultural experience of the Turin working class* (1987); Michael Frisch, 'Oral history and *Hard Times*: A review essay' (1972).
4. Composure is the construction of 'a version of the self that the teller can live with in relative psychic ease' (Summerfield, 2004). It was introduced by Graham Dawson, in his book *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (1994).

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Author biography

Andrea Hajek received her doctorate from the University of Warwick. Her dissertation was on the negotiation of public memories of protest in 1970s Italy, and is currently being prepared for publication in the *Memory Studies Series* at Palgrave Macmillan. She is the Senior Editorial Assistant for *Memory Studies*, and an Associate Editor for *Modern Italy*. She is a founding member of the Warwick Oral History Network. Other than cultural memory, protest movements and oral history, her research interests include digital and visual memories, terrorism in history education and trauma. She frequently publishes on a number of academic and cultural blogs (articles can be downloaded at: http://factotumish.wordpress.com/). Email: andreahajek@gmail.com

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